



MAPPING NEW CONTOURS TO TIME & SPACE: A STUDY ON THE EMERGING TRANS FAMILIES IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Queer lives in Kerala take a new turn when the trans couple Ziya Paval and Zahhad Fazil became the first transgender parents as Zahhad delivered their baby on February 2023. Though Zahhad delivered the baby, he wants to enter his name in the records as the 'father' and his partner Ziya as the 'mother' in all the records and medical certificate. This new concept of a family threatens the conventional system of what constitutes family and parenting. The question of family time and space differ widely as far as the heterosexuals and the queer subjects are concerned. This paper is an attempt to study the unexplored realm of the trans family and parenting in Kerala, utilizing the concepts on time and space of Judith Halberstam as is discussed in her essay on the same.

KEYWORDS: Trans couple, queer lives, marriage, parenting, time and space.

INTRODUCTION

In Judith Halberstam's seminal essay 'Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies' in the work *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, she claims that "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement and identification" (1). Quoting Foucault, Halberstam says that homosexuality "threatens people when it becomes 'a way of life' rather than as 'a way of having sex'" (1). She then traces out the emergence of queer time towards the end of the 20th century when the queer communities got shattered due to the spread of AIDS epidemic. According to her, this new emergence of queer time gives scope to rethink/rework the notions of what constitute family, reproduction etc.

Materials and Methods

In this paper titled 'Mapping New Contours to Time & Space: A Study on the Emerging Trans Families in Kerala', I intend to study the defying of the traditional structuring of family time and space, accentuating the fluidity of the same in the life of trans couples in Kerala as opposed to the heterosexual ones.

Recently, one Keralite trans couple, Ziya Paval and Zahhad Fazil announced that they are blessed with a baby. Ziya Paval is a trans woman and Zahhad Fazil is a trans man, although, the latter had not completed his sex re-assignment surgeries. He delivered the baby through C-Section at the Government Medical College, Kozhikode. Announcing her partner's pregnancy on their instagram page, Ziya Paval said that they are about to realise their dream of becoming a mother and a father. She added that Zahhad is eight month pregnant and that as far they know, this is the first trans man's pregnancy in India. Zahhad plans to complete the journey to his desired gender after six months or one year of his delivering the baby. They fell in love and started living together three years before. Flaunting the age old conceptions of what constitutes family, here is the success story of a trans couple who explored all the possibilities of gender. They have thwarted the heteronormative societal norms governing family structure, as to who can be qualified to be a father and mother. Here, the 'father' has given birth to a child and the 'mother' happily reports it to the world. This reversal of gender roles questions the rigid structure of the patriarchal society. However, as in the case of heterosexual couples, they are also performing their gender roles as 'father' and 'mother'; the only difference is that, here, the father was the one who delivered the baby. He plans to complete the remaining surgeries and thus, hopes to become a real male. He also plans to go to work after three months by giving the baby under the motherly care of his partner.

Vaaswat Sarkar in *Homegrown Newsletter*, comments on the 'incomplete' families when he says "the idea of a heteronormative family structure is so ingrained in Indian society that even single-parent children are treated with a sort of otherness- a kind of differentiation that comes with society viewing them as part of an 'incomplete' family" (n.p.). He also speaks of how the Western society challenges the traditional family structure and marriage. He says that "more unmarried cisgender couples are adopting orphans, married couples are opting for test-tube babies, a homosexual couple is adopting a baby or adopting any alternative form of raising a family that defies the traditional heteronormative family structure" (n.p.).

Who can marry, when and how can they beget children etc. are matters that are steered by the norms of the society and strictly practised by the institutionalized

marriage.

The above trans couple bravely fought their way out of this restricting family structure and have created their own.

This real life story of Ziya and Zahhad posits certain questions to the mainstream society, regarding gender, sexuality, family and parenting. In this paper the above questions are addressed and analysed in the contemporary scenario. Halberstam says that "reproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/ space constructs" (1). What Halberstam puts forward for discussion is the concept of family time - when and to whom one should get married and what time is considered 'normal' to produce offspring. According to him,

the time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples... Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environment for child rearing. (5)

Results and Discussions

In the case of Ziya and Zahhad, the concept of family time and space are altered in the sense that they have reversed their gender roles in order to conceive and raise their child. At first they tried to adopt a child but when they came across the legal barriers, they opted out of it. Later, they decided to give a pause to the sex reassignment surgeries so as to fulfil their long cherished dream of becoming a father and a mother. The concept of family time works different in the case of heterosexual and homosexual people. While a young, heterosexual cisgender person ('of marriageable age') will be busy with paying frequent visit to the beautician or shopping, a transgender person who wants to change his/ her biological gender will be equally busy with medical counselling, therapy sessions and health care activities, before his/ her marriage. When the heterosexuals get their family's ample financial and mental support at the time of their marriage, the queer individuals grapple with it. Most of them might have lost their family or have been expelled from their homes. A few who manages to gain the support of their family may then have to pass the hurdle of making them understand the need of sex reassignment surgery. They need to raise money, convince their family, undergo counselling sessions, start taking hormones and finally, undergo the required surgeries. At the prime time of their youth, they'll be chased by stigma, shame and violence.

The precarious existence of the queer community itself marks them as the 'unrecognized' category by the structures of power. But in the contemporary world, hopefully, they are slowly gaining recognition.

Spaces whether public, private or cyber remain a restricted area for those who come under the queer community. The public terrain delimits the possibilities of the LGBTQAI+ community in the sense that the structures of power (law, religion, education, drugs) that offer its services to the heteronormative majority often turn a blind eye towards the precarious queer community. Ananya Kumari Alex, a trans woman committed suicide at Ernakulam, Cochin, Kerala in 2021 due to the failure of her sex reassignment surgery. Physical and emotional space, that come under the private/ personal space are crucial in the total wellbeing of the individual. The 'coming out' phase becomes significant here as it is also a

stage where the individual overcomes his/ her own personal fears/ confusions regarding gender, realises it and openly declares it to the society. The cyber space today has become a place where anyone can sneak into the private world of others, can critically comment, pass judgments and crucify. The anonymity of cyber spaces has increased the vulnerability of the queer community and has given rise to a spurt of cybercrimes. The transgender people who fight their way through these social spaces have come up with their own social media channels, especially during the COVID lock down period. But unfortunately, most of them are threatened, harassed and bullied at these cyber spaces also. Recently, a young trans man named Praveen Nath ended his life owing to constant cyber-attacks that were directed against his family. He was the first transgender body builder of Kerala. He was also the first transgender who won the title of Mr. Kerala (2021). On the St. Valentine's Day of this year (2023) at Palakkad, Kerala, he got married to his love, Rishana Ayshu, a trans woman who is a model and winner of Miss Malabar Beauty Contest. It was said that, on social media platforms there were rumours regarding the couples' separation and it had affected him so much that he took his own life. This incident shows that it proves the homophobia of the mainstream heterosexual society that contempt the 'deviant' lives.

It is interesting to note that the ritualistic nature of marriage is accepted and practised by most of the homosexual and heterosexual counterparts. On their day of wedding, Praveen wore the traditional mundu and Rishana was dressed up as a beautiful bride in her saree. But whether they get legal recognition is another question. They believe that the act of marriage helps to gain recognition and acceptability in the society they live in. Uma, a transgender activist, in an interview on Outlook says that they are fighting for their rights each day. We get a picture of the unending stigma from her words. This is what she says about getting legal sanction to trans marriages:

Once the marriage law applies to us, it becomes legal. Many transgender people benefit from these relationships.We can live how heterosexual families live....Many transgender people are supporting children. They are not legally adopting them but they are providing them with a good education. But when they take these children to schools for admission, we are asked to provide husband's name. If I am not legally married, how can I give my husband's name? (n.p.)

Getting legally recognised is something that the queer community aspires to. Chayanika Shah in her essay 'Family beyond blood and marriage' (*Sexuality, Abjection and Queer Existence in Contemporary India*) says that:

The law and society give sanction to a family made by a man and a woman through marriage wherein they are expected to take the vow of monogamy because the purpose of such a family is to produce and provide for those who are connected by blood...As an institution, the family is not equal and, in spite of a Constitution that grants equality to all its citizens, this basic, core unit of society openly defies this principal in multiple ways. (210)

Queer lives, with their 'deviant' nature and 'abnormal' desires openly challenge the above concepts that govern marriage and family life.

When the traditional concept of family changes, the question of child bearing, rearing, adoption, parenting etc. takes on a new turn. When trans couples like Ziya and Zahhad raise a child, what the society fears the most is whether they will be able to raise the child as a socially responsible citizen who follows all the norms. The child may get confused regarding who is the mother and father; or else, who plays the role of the mother and father. As the traditional family is strictly structured by societal norms, the trans family traces its own new path embracing fluidity of gender.

CONCLUSION

The family time and space in the case of a trans family thus differs from that of their counterparts. As Zahahhad and Ziya at first, chose not to reveal the gender identity of their child, we can hope that with such families around us, we can bring a radical change to the traditional structuring of family. As Foucault says what threatens people is not homosexuality as a way of having sex but as a way of life.

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